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## PAINS AND PALLIATIVES IN TEACHING ENGLISH COMPOSITION

Among all those who—to put it with the usual dignifying elegance of phrase—follow the academic profession, none is so commonly obliged to justify his ways, if not his very existence, as is the teacher of English composition. He is one of the most familiar, most permanent objects of pity, scorn, or suspicion, one of the most generally convenient butts of ridicule. The case of the professor of ancient languages and literatures is totally different. Not only is he the rather awesome guardian of arcana rare to the many, but he is the recognized apostle of a Lost Cause, and as such enjoys the respectful countenance due to any honorable though purblind zealot. As for the professor of “olericulture,” or the instructor in typewriting, it goes without saying that *his* skin is impervious to any thrusts that the academically well-born may offer, so that it were a nugatory interest that should waste any sighs or laughter over *him*.

But your teacher of English composition, however proud or complacent he may be, must usually be taking an attitude defensive or offensive among his rightful or accidental fellows. The slave of his own or imposed ideals and methods, the victim of his own election to follow an almost inescapably self-flagellant, self-sacrificial order of life, he can be, in the general, neither scholar nor producer. Those of his associates, members of other departments, who do not regard him as a kind of intellectual mechanic, probably somewhat valuable but of low degree, look upon him as a kind of intellectual fop, tolerable only because it would be idle to take him seriously. Even his friends misunderstand him. They accuse him of double dealing. Their charge is that he truckles to the spirit of the time by advertising his courses as a school of training directed to practical ends, while he means actually to follow a subtly diverting programme of dalliance in mere literature or philosophy or some other equally entertaining pastime of the mind.

This, however, is not the worst face of the matter. Abused and misconceived as he may be by others, it is within himself

that the confirmed, the irredeemable teacher of English composition must find the cruelest assaults upon his dignity and self-respect.

Recall the hapless beginning of his typical history. A month before he took his baccalaureate he knew not what should become of him in the chilly world when he had left the woolly irresponsibility of college. From this state of vague concern he was rescued by the head of the department of English, who one day in a hurry between classes invited him to become an assistant in the department the next year while pursuing his graduate studies. How flattering! This innocent youth, what surmise could he form of the irons being riveted upon his body and soul? What match the ingenuously hopeful eyes of this politely cultivated young man for the sinister, calculating gleam in the spectacled eyes of the department head? Another babe is thrown to Moloch. But die instantly he cannot. His doom is to live in the flames.

Thus the branding. Now for years he has known the grill of themes. There is no need to recite again the humiliating miseries of that grill, for he himself with humorous self-castigation has often enough exposed his sores and callouses to the curiosity of the reading public. But let him confess, if he dare and will, some means of alleviation that he may have learned.

In the last analysis there are but three courses open to one who must solve the problem of themes. The most common is plain submission to the grind. With a reasonably honest sense of consecration to his work, and with a respectably courageous forgetting of his chronic stomach-ache or eye-ache or twitching nerves, in a quiet ardor of fidelity to the needs of his pupils the reader of endless laboring little manuscripts may accept his lot for what it is worth. He knows himself to be marked as a man of perhaps a too docile conscience, admirable or laughable according to the character of his critic.

The second course is rebellion against the killing régime imposed by pedagogical precedent and departmental law. Whatever its measure of apostasy or recalcitrancy, and however open or surreptitious it may be, the act of the rebel distinguishes him at least as a man of some daring independence in the academic

world. Let him have the temerity to accept the arguably defensible convenience of the fire-place as a disinterested consumer of surplusage, or persuade himself of the ultimate economy in paying, out of his own purse, some clever and corruptible upper-classman or graduate student to "do" the bulk of his themes, and he is not only a relatively free man but also a more or less secretly commended one.

It is the third course, however, that carries the largest net total of comfort, self-satisfaction, and public approval. This is to conceive, elaborate, and exploit a *theory* as to how English composition ought to be taught, a theory scientifically (that is to say, ingeniously) considerate of the pupils' requirements and capacities, and at the same time thrifty of the instructor's endurance and will. Let a teacher be sufficiently inventive, unscrupulous, and plausible, his way to success by the process of a systematically labor-saving theory is certain. Let him arrive, for instance, at the conviction that students learn most quickly and responsively by *correcting one another's themes*—obviously it needs but that he should have imagination and assurance to convince anyone else with an uncalcified mind of the indisputable beauty and practicality of his plan. Besides, if he has the magical faculty for inoculating his pupils with an unskeptical submission to their instructor's wisdom and his enthusiasm for their welfare, his reputation for progressiveness and efficiency will soon reach as far as the president's office. By those who know, it is maintained that there is profit in this. And if envious malcontents who lack advancement sullenly growl "Opportunism," who cares?

Theory is one way, and all things considered, the most tactful and most tactically astute, to the solution of the problem of themes. But one must be sharp to know how to use it. Naturally enough to those who more stolidly "follow the academic profession," theory is frequently the most pitiless of task-masters. Among teachers of English composition there is a type, almost Holofernesian in the astigmatism of his intelligence, who is above all things a stickler for the minutiae of written expression. Often this gentle fanatic is rather likable in his mediæval niceness—that is, likable to others than his groaning

victims. His theory confers the grace of salvation only on the *correct*. To ignorantly or carelessly or boldly cleave your infinitive is, of course, to court damnation at his hands. The rigor of his red ink or blue pencil has confirmed him a self-immolating monomaniac—and probably a dyspeptic. He is a pleasantly pitiable figure. But there is a less agreeable stric-tarian related to him, the type of theorist who cossets in his rectilinear brain the illusion that elementary English composition is properly a course in logic. The normal student under such an instructor must surely be pardonable if he should sometimes fancy a futuristic or cubistic quality in the extraordinary geometrical processes of his teacher's mind. For it is questionable whether even the normal instructor may not occasionally feel a vertiginous embarrassment in the presence of stern logic, and it is whispered that the professional teachers of that hard science are inclined to be rather coolly amused at the English teacher's maladroitness in their field. There must be a fallacy somewhere in the assumption that because one has drawn a diagram he has designed a buildable house or revealed the true plan of one that already stands.

The theorist who thus runs the risk of stultifying himself by his addiction to logic is a believer in the supreme virtue of curative and preventive discipline. To label this impressively he calls it propædæutic. Train the student, he maintains, in the use of the tools of orderly thought and expression, and you have performed your indispensable first duty. Keep him busy in the machine-shop of cause and effect, generalization, definition, and the rest. Never mind whether he works with his own ideas and images, or with somebody else's facts and opinions. Give him method; teach him how.

To the generally somewhat pachydermatous professors of economics, commerce, engineering, and other practical things this is right doctrine. "After all," says one of these teachers of really important matters, "the true business of your English department is to attend to the elementary needs of *our* students." (Such a remark, of course, comes rather from a personality than from a representative of a particular subject; he might equally well be a professor of government or a professor of mathematics.)

And it is the influence of this attitude that begets in English departments the theorist who is imbued with an all-absorbing sense of the primary excellence of practical results. Sometimes this theorist is so thoroughgoing that he sloughs off the too unmistakable skin in which he was born into the department and grows the protective coloration of a teacher of "Business English." About such a subject there is something bastarding in the eyes of the orthodox conservative, and yet the associate who adopts it is regarded as an estimable renegade after all. There's no denying that he *is* useful—and that he "lets himself in" for hard work. In the sight of the grilled theme-reader, that penalty entitles one to forgiveness for almost any villainy.

Another variety of theorist is the believer in oral composition. He is already increasingly numerous, for to train young people, those who are presumably to be the aristocratic leaders of a democratic society, in the art of spoken discourse is now regarded by deans and presidents, professors of education, and all other prescient dictators of academic practices as a necessary element in the process of forming a competent citizenry. It is not to be supposed that oral composition and public speaking are quite identical. Perhaps they may justly be thought of as twins—more likely, cousins. There is no great warmth of affection between them. Teachers of public speaking are inclined to look upon teachers of oral composition as presumptuous meddlers, tyros in a branch of instruction that calls for special aptitude and much technical training. Teachers of English composition who, out of conviction or under the pressure of the prevailing mode, require their pupils to render brief addresses in class, reciprocate the unfriendliness by supposing the courses in public speaking to be given over largely to such trifling considerations as breathing exercises, the disposal of the hands, and the study of how to read poems with emotional sympathy and in proper dramatic manner. There is still many a stubborn instructor in English who skeptically continues to protest against the importance attached to the oral part of the composition that he endeavors to teach; he stands to his guns on the ground that speaking tends to foster glibness, specious fluency, inexactness, and that all the little errors (in such acceptably vital matters as

grammar and spelling) which blemish the written page are blurred into insignificance by the irresponsible tongue. But the theorist who is so completely *en rapport* with the spirit of the time that he sees how profoundly the welfare of society depends on proficiency in the spoken work is unphased. He has the weight of public opinion (outside of his own classroom) with him, and can safely enjoy to the full the still somewhat novel exemption from toilsome hours of theme-reading that the new order provides.

Meantime one must not be forgetting the other types that flourish, or languish, among the obscure thousands of teachers of how to write. The theorist's logic conclusively proves that there must still be in patient if sodden existence great numbers of instructors who cling in the surf to the safe ropes of the textbook. Hardly a day drags by that one does not find in his mail at least two or three advertisements of new textbooks, from publishers whose only motive in life is to produce the *ne plus ultra* in the printed base of supplies that every teacher has craved since the beginning of his career. It is not undiverting to note the desperate ingenuity that the authors of these volumes have exercised in their sometimes almost sublime effort to dress up the wretched old precepts and formulas in a new guise. The results of their devotion to the cause at least provide the gullible teacher with the hope springing from the publishers' heartening assurances that this latest author or editor has succeeded as none before him in "vitalizing" his subject.

But the books themselves! Almost invariably the same dull, forbidding exterior, ugly enough to crush with irremediable dreariness the soul of any avid student. Yet teachers there are who will fasten these cramping life-preservers about their pupils, careless if those sink who could perfectly well swim without them, in the confidence that those who would otherwise certainly sink may thus make shift to keep afloat. The author of an exhaustive textbook on argumentation writes cheerfully, on the title-page of a copy for presentation to a colleague, the familiar lines:—

"If there should be another flood,  
Then do thou hither fly!  
For though the whole world be submerged,  
This book will still be dry!"

Let the teacher dependent on the publishers grant his pupils this comfort, and perhaps the rules and principles assembled in the almost inevitable territories of description, narration, exposition, and argumentation may seem a less uselessly dusty way to travel.

Devotees of the textbook are also normally given to the copious use of "literary specimens." Formerly these very choicely selected and edited revelations of beauty in structure and style consisted almost wholly of excerpts from the time-hallowed works of the masters. But of late years it has become the fashion to resuscitate the ennuied spirits of the teacher, to placate the scornful carpers among the progressive members of other departments, and incidentally to tickle the suspicious palate or appease the querulous appetite of the student, by producing volumes in which the masters are elbowed into abashed subordination to a very democratic assortment of conspicuously clever and "significant" moderns. A general terror of old-fogyism, a passion for giving English composition as sharp a tang of contemporaneity as that enjoyed by the courses in agriculture or business administration, has seized on all teachers who have been made to believe that they must fight for themselves and their subject.

In an increasingly widespread number of cases, also, this subscription to new methods means subscription for magazines. The idea having once been conceived that the drowsiness and obstinacy of the pupil might be counteracted by putting into his hands something that belonged not to the library but to the news-stand, a fashion was started, and now to the rain of textbook publishers' announcements is added the hailstorm of magazine publishers' advertisements. Their rivalry in the unctuous blandishment of themselves and their intended buyers is pretty to see. As for the old masters, the superannuated Macaulays and Thackerays, they may as well admit to themselves that Charles Lamb was more modernly foresightful than the rest of them when he took the bold step of declaring himself a writer for antiquity. It is the writer for and of to-day who has become the model for the young people of an egocentrically democratic age. Does anyone remember that Don Quixote's niece wanted



to know why that crazy gentleman went "seeking for better bread than is made of wheat"?

The indurated theorists, of course, have small patience with this magazine-mongering pursuit of the neoteric. But they scowl the more heavily upon those shirkers of elementary necessity who montessoriously choose to feed their students on the tasty methods and materials of the short-story. Whole courses in short-story writing are, to be sure, generally limited to sophomores or upperclass students, and to the nondescript faddists and intellectual flittermice of the summer session. But full many an instructor in freshman English contrives to devote a large proportion of the year's programme to narration, and this soon gradates, or degenerates, into practice in writing stories. "Why live on lentils when lotus is to your hand?" Why insist on smothering the young mind and imagination in the stuffy workshop of exposition, when you can give it the pullulating freedom of natural play in the outdoors of story-writing? Facts, thought, and imagination, the ingredients of composition—you get them all in a good narrative, say the advocates of emphasis on this form of expression. And you get self-realization, and the graphic touch, and red blood—whatever belongs to *life*. To which the sterner sort reply that all you get, at the best, is a useless kind of superficial cleverness, a large element of conceit, and a general relaxation of vigilance and concern for the fundamentals of clear, orderly, correct thinking, writing, speaking.

Short-story enthusiasts are not the worst offenders, however, in the sight of the strictarians. The most reprehensibly seditious, the most recreant type of teacher is he who exploits the personalities of his students by exploiting his own. Perhaps this is what all teachers do, consciously or unconsciously, the precisian and the enforcer of logic as well as the brilliant young maker of spicular comments on everything under the sun. But the instructor who provokes the gravest headshaking and most dourly mumbled condemnation among the righteously regular of his associaton is one whose only law for the student seems to be the old *Fay ce que voudras*. Eavesdrop at the door of his classroom and you may catch from his sonorous voice some such astounding phrase as "the smooth flow of Pater's oily prose,

sweet like honey dripping in an urn''; or you may hear an awakeningly trenchant observation concerning the "economic revolution essential to our inchoate democracy," or a keen annotation of a passage from somebody's "Mob Psychology"—it matters not. His language is always fulgent, and he lectures stimulantly on whatever for the moment may engage his intellectual virtuosity—to pupils whom the high schools may have imperfectly taught how to speak and punctuate. But why not "pass the buck" on these irksome matters to the high schools? asks the bright young college instructor, intent on ideation.

Teachers of English composition are thus seen to be a diverse species—perhaps it were more true to say a genus of many species, each diverse. The varieties that have been sketchily indicated in the preceding ill-tempered paragraphs would appear to be each relatively free. But in organized departments, of course, the play of individual notion or idiosyncrasy suffers some let and hindrance. Here and there a department of English composition, or the corps of instructors concerned chiefly with composition, will have as its head a paternally benevolent professor who cares not to impose on his subordinates or associates any system or mode especially dear to himself. In the rare instance, the chief, so far from being of this negative sort, will be a man of such forceful and charming personality that all the instructors over whose work he presides must catch the contagion of his imaginative gusto and more or less consciously ape his ways. But the type of head who usually gets himself into the position of responsibility and direction is likely to be a small tyrant or amateur autocrat with an *idée fixe* and a passion for uniformity. He adds to his intellectual (or perhaps one should say more reservedly, his theoretical) preference the pressure of a moral conviction. Experience and speculative reflection have combined with a natural talent of farseeingness to assure him of the correctness of his aims, methods, and criteria. But he is shrewdly careful to give the members of his corps an impression that he does not mean to domineer, while constantly insisting that the prosperity of the course depends on singleness of principle and harmoniousness of effort among all concerned. Confident within himself that his own doctrine

is apodictically sound, he must yet tactfully argue its rightness to his associates.

One of the most vexatious problems for this chief of staff is uniformity of standard in grading themes. It is assumed to be vitally important, to a society of democratic equality in rewards and punishments, that Richard Roe in Section 1 should not be more heavily penalized for grammatical errors than his solecistic brother in Section 25, and that Daphne Doe in Section 2 should not be more liberally complimented for stylistic elegance than her correspondingly felicitous sister in Section 24. Hence at the meetings of the corps of section masters one may commonly behold the spectacle of a number of ostensibly disinterested instructors listening with judicially knitted brows to the reading of somebody's "doubtful" paper on "How to Raise Dahlias," or "The Value of Education." Ghoulish judges about a naked infant! Let its toes be turned in, that is to say, its ending faulty, and a critic eager to win to his interest a reputation for severity will snarl a grade of "low pass." But another critic, disposed to fancy inturned toes as "promisingly distinctive," will smile a grade of "creditable." Wherein the director of the course will recognize a "fundamental problem."

About these sub-departmental meetings there seems to be almost inevitably one especially distressful circumstance. The hour at which they are set is bound to be the very time when the instructor is most weary of his profession, when his nerves jerk, his mind is a squashy lump, and his soul wilts like a stifled flower. If that is not the case, it will be the very time when, having dispatched the conscience-worrying labors of the day, he would arch his chest for a brisk four-miles-an-hour, or escape to the re-humanizing liveliness of golf or tennis, or to the unexhausting excitement of persiflage and billiards at the club. There is the bare possibility, also, that he still cherishes the delusion of having some zest for small researchful burrowings into the literature of the past. But let him look to an hour of studious fellowship with the habitual grubbing scholars in the library stack, and there sounds the mandatory bell that summons him to council over themes and methods. The meeting that should theoretically be a combination of stimulant and demulcent turns out to be nothing but a narcotic.

Can anything be done about it all? Is there any way of salvation for the mere teacher of English composition? Within himself, we say, he finds the most grievous underminings of his dignity and self-respect. Whether he be that feebleness sort who is inured to knowing himself a trodden worm, or that more toughened sort who has been able, by bent of personal vanity or by sense of self-forgetting duty, to face his world with unembarrassed mien, he must often feel a sudden nausea, a bitterness of taste, a weariness, a giving of the knees as he carries through the day. Envy must often smite him—and this is corroding to the spirit. Envious are those his fellows in other fields who regularly reap cool benefits of leisure, and academic standing, and pecuniary comfort, while he must needs unheeded keep toiling in the sun. Occasionally, in the general gamble, some lucky, persistent, crafty individual will emerge and gain a perch of eminence. But the rank and file must usually be justifying their ways, and to themselves as well as others, their very existence.

The drill-master of recruits will shout, a hundred times a day, "Heads up! Eyes off the ground!" That is one of the elementary lessons in military bearing. And probably it is one of the lessons that the teacher of English composition must compel himself to learn, for he ordinarily lacks the military bearing that the man devoted, or condemned, to the rigors of choreful teaching cannot very manfully afford to do without.

For one thing the drill-master's sharp admonition, as applied to the instructor in English, means shaking off the slavish habit of fretting over unessential regulations. "Erewhon" Butler, while a Cambridge undergraduate, wrote an essay, "On English Composition," in which he said among other rebellious and wholesome things: "I incline to believe that as irons support the rickety child, whilst they impede the healthy one, so rules, for the most part, are but useful to the weaker among us." There are many authorities, in many matters, to vouch for the soundness of the general doctrine enunciated in this observation. And it is healthful doctrine for the teacher as well as for his pupil. The courses in elementary English composition have a tendency to give a calcareous quality to the minds and souls of those who conduct them because they are so imbedded in form and method. Uniformity among teachers is an ideal easy of

excessive enforcement. It is an ideal that deadens often, animates seldom. Some limit to individual vagary there must undeniably be. A teacher of elementary English composition probably cannot help to make the world safe for democracy by allowing correctness in use of words and construction of sentences to go by the board for the sake of starting thought about contemporary problems in social science or developing facility in writing stories. But give the individual instructor the respectful and trustful freedom that his intelligence and intellectual honor may reasonably expect, and if he be not an incurable coxcomb or a knave, he will have something of the self-esteem, and attain something of the broad success, that everybody quite naturally and legitimately craves. This sounds very solemn, but the occasion does call for some tightening of the lips.

Freedom in the choice of his methods, the conduct of his work, and the administering of grades, without undue violation of that principle of team-work which is philosophically as well as scientifically proved invaluable—this, in an age of liberal ideals, the teacher has a right to enjoy. But “Heads up! Eyes off the ground!” implies also freedom for a larger relish of life and literature than that generally vouchsafed the teacher bound to the wheel of themes. If one follows the course of rebellion, or that of contriving a labor-saving theory, he needs no rescue. But if, like most of those who have allowed themselves to be virtually conscripted into the service, one follows the expected course, he stands in dire need of freedom for reading according to his heart’s desire, and for whatever intellectual recreation or exploration springs to his liking. Thrift has been fitly defined to mean so living that accomplishment and the expenditure of effort are equal. To the faithful teacher of English composition it must often seem that he is spending far beyond his income. Give him more freedom to follow the predilections of his tastes, and he will have the richer quantity and content of life, which will enable him to be, in the long run (or stagger), the more liberal benefactor of the students whom he undertakes to equip for the just businesses and amenities of the ambitious world.

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